

THIEF-PROOF STAMPS and TRUE PHILATELY

In Bulletin 62 (Nov'64) there was a very brief mention of this subject and in Bulletin 170 (July'77) Mike Burrows wrote a full page about this article.

The paper was first written by GORDAN WARD M.D., in 1925. At the 12th Philatelic Congress of Great Britain held at Cambridge in 1926, Dr. Ward presented his paper "Thief-Proof Stamps & Legitimate Philately" to the delegates.

Searching through the library of the NPS, Dave Hill came across a copy of the full paper presented by Dr. Ward. There was no indication of when it was written or where it was published so I wasted two months making enquiries. Lo-and-behold, when preparing the Index I came across the above two references. So the Index has proved it's worth to me already.

The following represents the parts most relevant to perfins collectors and will be continued in the October Bulletin.

"In the year 1860 the population of Great Britain and Ireland was approximately 30 million persons, and these posted more than 500 million letters. To put it another way, 100 letters per year came to every inhabited house in the country - on an average, of course. It was about this time that the activities of the stamp thief began to impress the Post Office, so far that measures were taken to circumscribe his activities and out of the measures came a new and interesting side-line in philately.

It has long been the custom of the Post Office to buy in stamps for which customers have no use, a custom which was more generally useful when postal orders had yet to be invented. But there was no way in which the Post Office could tell whether the stamps tendered to them had been legitimately acquired, or whether they had been removed by some felonious clerk from the stamp drawer of his employer. The Post Office, therefore, permitted employers to so mark their stamps that they could be identified and such marked stamps could not be negotiated at Post Offices. The first stamps so marked were those of the Union Society of Oxford, these having the letters "O.U.S." between two wavy lines printed on the front in red.

These were the first thief-proof stamps in the sense in which that term is employed in this paper, and I claim that true philately must as much concern itself with their origin and evolution as it does with any other feature of postage stamps actually used or valid for the franking of postal packages. It matters not that the overprint was at first on the front and later on the back of the stamp, or that overprints gave way to perforations; all are definite features of our postal system and so of philately.

But this view is not always accepted and I may quote the view of Mr. James Watts, Jnr., who is himself responsible for the only surviving underprint. In spite of this fact, he writes as follows:-

"Although a keen stamp collector myself, I rather take the line that all interferences with the natural state of the stamp are of doubtful interest."

I hardly dare to suggest that this is indeed the view of a "stamp-collector" rather than that of a true philatelist but I shall scarcely be disturbed if anyone else ventures that criticism. For myself, I would boldly assert that philately is not the collection of postage stamps but the accumulation of such examples as may be required to illustrate postal history, whether stamps or envelopes or postmarks. Certainly, if they illustrate something unworthy, e.g., the financial exigencies of some petty state, we may choose to shrug our shoulders and pass them by. But if they illustrate some genuine emergency, some bona fide need or some natural development - why, then we should include them in our catalogues and collections and strive to understand their meaning.

Now we must return to the stamp thief and study the changes which he has made in our postal system. The O.U.S. overprint was carried out by Messrs. Perkins, Bacon and Co., the then stamp contractors, and the first delivery seems to have been made in 1859. The charge was an initial one of £5 for making a plate with an additional 5/- per hundred sheets for printing. It may have been this charge which prevented any great advantage being taken of the permission to overprint stamps. The firm of Wm. Dawbarn & Co., of Liverpool, printed its name in black, and the overprint "Holloway 244" in blue is recorded, but the latter I have never seen." (Ed. - much more has come to light since 1926 of course).

To be continued.